

Guidelines For Quality Fly-Ins

WASHINGTON WOULD BE a less exciting place without its out-of-town visitors. And “fly ins” — when interest groups bring their members to town to lobby legislators and agency officials — do more than just keep the hotels full and the Metro lines long. They can draw attention to an issue, rally stakeholders and even move the dial on legislative priorities.

Take **Jake Weatherly** as an example. The software company CEO had seen patent trolls — people who snap up obscure patents to claim a cut from successful enterprises — wreak havoc on small businesses, particularly software and app developers. So he cashed in his frequent flyer miles and came to D.C. from Oregon for one of the Association for Competitive Technology’s annual fly-ins.

“I really didn’t have any kind of experience in terms of working with legislators, staffers and committees,” he says. ACT, like many organizations in Washington, spent several days preparing participants like Weatherly for meetings with Congress. He learned how to use talking points, got a legislative overview and took media training.

Weatherly found himself in the office of his hometown lawmaker, Democratic Rep. **Peter DeFazio**, discussing the effects of patent trolls on small businesses like his with DeFazio and an aide who handles such issues.

“That conversation at least sparked some follow-up conversations” with collaboration over a couple of years, Weatherly says. DeFazio found an eager partner across the aisle, Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, and together they introduced legislation that would require companies alleging patent infringement to pay defendants’ costs, including attorney fees, if the court decides that the plaintiff either was not the original inventor, did not produce or sell the item the patent covers, or was not a university or technology-transfer organization.

What makes for a successful fly-in? CQ Roll Call talked to several organizers and participants for their tips. Here are some of their suggestions.

Have a Clear “Ask”

• An effective ask goes beyond seeking support for specific legislative action: sign a letter, co-sponsor a bill, offer an amendment. **David Bell**, director at Prime Advocacy, which provides sup-



port services for fly-ins, recommends putting the discussion topic into the initial meeting request, and keeping the ask to two or three bullet points.

• On a controversial issue where the member sits squarely on the opposite side of the fence, an advocate isn’t likely to bring about a radical change of heart. But there may be areas, such as funding levels or state-specific components affecting jobs back home, that could elicit cooperation.

Meet With the Right Member

• In almost all cases, that’s the constituent’s own lawmakers, even when others get more news attention or are in charge of the relevant legislation. “Constituents are the most effective visitors. Offices are not interested in meeting with people who aren’t their constituents,” says **Darcy Scott Martin**, who runs her own business managing fly-in days for organizations. The best fly-ins, she says, attract people from across the country, leading to more office visits, rather than a concentrated group from the Washington area.



• Knowing the lawmaker’s committee work is one of the best ways to be effective — members may have some influence over who is chosen to testify, and committees are more likely to write and edit legislation than the full House or Senate.

Keep It Local

• “Make it district- or state-specific,” says **Joanna Serra**, a former legislative assistant to Democratic Rep. **Timothy H. Bishop** of New York and Democratic Sen. **Richard J. Durbin** of Illinois who is now director of government relations and communications

at the American University of Antigua. Especially useful, she says, are district-specific information and facts that cannot be found online, such as those from internal research. “We need the people who actually do the jobs to tell us how it works. Too much lobbying spin is not good, just tell us the facts,” Serra says.



Don’t Shy Away From Staff

• Many congressional meetings are delegated to staff aides, with the member popping in for a quick handshake or photo. The aides can often give an honest assessment of a group’s agenda and how likely the member is to support it. Capitol Hill has a large contingent of 20-somethings, the experts say, so constituents shouldn’t be daunted if the aide seems particularly young. “In our case, it makes sense to take meetings with MLAs,” meaning military legislative assistants, says **Angela Guzman**, who organized fly-ins for a large defense contractor and now works for Integrated Direct Marketing. “Is it a nice bonus to have the member of Congress in the room? Absolutely, but at the end of the day you want your issue expert there,” Guzman says.

Follow Up

• The work isn’t done when the citizen-lobbyist walks out the door of Rayburn. Did the member do what he or she was asked? Did the request get lost in the shuffle? Thank-you cards, follow-up phone calls and letters can work wonders. “It’s more helpful to anticipate the questions rather than follow-up, but if we ask for stuff, follow up with it,” Serra says.

— REBECCA GALE